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Security Is a Human Right, Too

By WILLIAM F. SCHULZ

When I was a sophomore in high school, I became acquainted with a religious group that called itself Moral Rearmament. Its adherents were required to practice four virtues without compromise: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love. To a 14-year-old, this formula seemed eminently sensible, and I decided that I would become a disciple. And for a few days I was.



For those few days, I tried never to lie. I tried to vanquish every impure thought from my head. I tried to be generous to a fault and to bestow upon all of God's creatures my beatific love. But in short order I saw that these imperatives might conflict. When, for example, a much-cherished relative who was notorious for her bad breath asked me to give her a big kiss on the lips, which standard was I to follow -- that of absolute honesty or absolute love?

At a relatively early age, I learned that if you try to pursue two or more virtues at the same time, you may need to compromise one of them or the other.

As the executive director of Amnesty International U.S.A., I often think of this experience when I listen to government officials and some human rights advocates debate how to balance security and liberty. Too often, both sides talk as if only one of these virtues really matters.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, my own organization and many other human rights and civil liberties groups have been outspoken -- and rightly so -- in our condemnation of human rights violations committed in the war on terror. We have chastised one government after another for using terrorism as an excuse to muzzle peaceful dissent. We have criticized the United States for its arbitrary roundup of Arab and Muslim residents, for the incommunicado detention of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay in defiance of the Geneva Convention and for many other activities.

The human rights community has repeatedly pointed out that it is difficult to conduct a war in defense of the rule of law when you are shredding that rule yourself, and it is impossible to convince Muslims around the world that the war on terror is not a war on Islam if Muslims are the pre-eminent targets of discrimination.

But what about the protection of personal security? How well have we done in holding the feet of terrorists and their supporters to the fire for their human rights violations? In this respect, the record of human rights organizations is far more mixed. For while we were quick to condemn the 9/11 attacks, very few of us have taken concrete steps since then to help bring Al Qaeda and its minions to account.

This lacuna is surprising inasmuch as being free from the threat of terrorism is not just a nice idea; it is our right as human beings. Indeed, Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that "everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person" -- rights that terrorists surely vitiate when they injure or kill civilians. It is not enough, therefore, to champion Article 9's guarantee that "no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest [or] detention" without wrestling with the question of how such rights square with those articulated in Article 3. But this is a struggle we in the human rights world have generally shied away from joining.

Part of the reason for our reticence to take on Al Qaeda is practical. Unlike the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka or the Shining Path of Peru or the Palestinian suicide bombers, all of which major human rights organizations have reported on frequently and censured repeatedly, Al Qaeda is hard to find. It operates in the shadows. It is not associated with just one country or region. And if the premier intelligence agencies in the world cannot unravel all its mysteries, human rights groups can hardly be expected to do a better job.

Moreover, the traditional techniques of the human rights movement are unlikely to work with Al Qaeda. One can hardly imagine Osama bin Laden opening thousands of letters entreating him to desist from violence or scanning a Congressional resolution calling for his capture and proclaiming, "By Jove, they're right!"

But there is more to it than that. The international community has not been able to reach agreement on a common definition of "terrorism." (One survey discovered 109 different ones.) Among other reasons, it's said that "one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist" or that governments have illicitly killed far more people over the years than terrorists ever will.

Neither observation is without merit. At one time or another, the abolitionist hero John Brown and the Nobel Peace Prize winners Menachem Begin and Nelson Mandela were all considered "terrorists." In some countries, the word has become almost synonymous with "political opponent." The Chinese, for example, consider peaceful Tibetan Buddhists vicious terrorists; Robert Mugabe regards the democratic opposition in Zimbabwe in a similar vein.

But the fact that history has rehabilitated reputations is no excuse for evading moral judgment today. And the fact that governments have been responsible for massive death and destruction offers no excuse for others' atrocities. The human rights movement should be in the forefront of calling for an international treaty that defines terrorism, outlines appropriate ways to combat it and thereby provides security for all.

The crux of the problem, however, is that treaties are only as good as the states that enforce them. Already we have seen the United States government cite "human rights" as the fallback rationale for a war against Iraq that, no matter how welcome the departure of Saddam Hussein, was undertaken in a fashion that did enormous damage to the unity of the international community -- a unity upon which human rights depend for whatever degree of credibility and power they may claim. All presidents have on occasion treated human rights the way a bad cook uses a spice -- to cover up an otherwise unpalatable policy. What greater mischief might George W. Bush do if given access to ever more pungent seasoning?

To succumb to such trepidation, however, is to allow President Bush to set not only his agenda but also our own. If we in the human rights community abhor the targeting of civilians in any context, as we surely do, then we need to act as if we believe it. We need to report as best we can on the funding sources and recruitment tactics of Al Qaeda's network; call to account those governments that allow themselves to become entangled with terrorist cells; name the suppliers of arms to terrorist groups -- suppliers who include established states, not just "rogue" ones; mobilize grass-roots opposition to terrorism by addressing root causes like economic deprivation or social discrimination; and offer a clear articulation of the ways in which respect for human rights helps offset the terrorists' appeal.

Human rights emerge out of the fact that all people know misery. During the Spanish Civil War, Stephen Spender was a fierce opponent of General Franco and the Fascists. Reflecting on the war some years later, Spender, while retaining his horror at Fascism, looked squarely into the corruption of his own heart: "When I saw photographs of children murdered by the Fascists," he wrote in "The God That Failed," "I felt furious pity. When the supporters of Franco talked of Red atrocities, I merely felt indignant that people should tell such lies. In the first case I saw corpses; in the second only words. . . . I gradually acquired a certain horror of the way in which my own mind worked. It was clear to me that unless I cared about every murdered child impartially, I did not really care about children being murdered at all."

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